

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-07 NSC-07 SP-03 SS-20 RSC-01 CIAE-00

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FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2041

INFO SECDEF WASHDC

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY OSLO

USMISSION NATO BRUSSELS

USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 7192

E.O. 11652: XGDS-3

TAGS: MASS, BEXP, BE, NATO

SUBJECT: F-104 REPLACEMENT

1. I RECOMMEND THAT THE SECRETARY SEE THE BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER, VAN ELSLANDE, DURING THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND RAISE WITH HIM THE PROBLEM OF THE F-104 REPLACEMENT. IN MY JUDGEMENT, THE QUESTION OF WHICH FIGHTER AIRCRAFT BELGIUM AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FOUR-NATION CONSORTIUM BUY IS OF HIGH POLITICAL, MILITARY, AND ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE TO THE U.S. IN MANY WAYS BELGIUM IS THE KEY TO THIS MATTER. IF BELGIUM IS WILLING TO BUY AMERICAN AIRCRAFT, THE OTHERS PROBABLY WILL AS WELL. IF BELGIUM DECIDES TO BUY THE FRENCH PLANE, ON OR MORE OF THE OTHER THREE COUNTRIES MAY FOLLOW.

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2. THE DECISION OF THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT ON WHICH AIR

COMBAT FIGHTER TO BUY WILL BE MADE BY THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS, IN WHICH THE KEY MISISTERS ARE: PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS, DEFENSE MINISTER VANDEN BOEYNANTS, FOREIGN MINISTER VAN ELSLANDE, ECONOMIC MINISTER OLEFFE, AND FINANCE MINISTER DE CLERQ.

3. VANDEN BOEYNANTS GIVES EVERY INDICATION OF CONTINUING TO SUPPORT THE ACQUISITION OF THE MIRAGE. THE RECENT PRESS ATTACK ON VANDEN BOEYNANTS' MOTIVES MAY HAVE SHAKEN HIM A BIT. BUT WE THINK IT WOULD BE UNWISE TO ASSUME THAT HE HAS CHANGED HIS PRO-FRNECH STAND. TINDEMANS APPEARS TO FAVOR AN AMERICAN AIRCRAFT. HOWEVER, WE DOUBT THAT HE WILL TAKE ON VANDEN BOEYNANTS UNLESS HE HAS SUPPPORT FROM ONE OR MORE OF HIS MINISTERIAL COLLEAGUES. OLEFFE HAS NOT INDICATED WHERE HE STANDS. BUT HIS STAFF HAVE BEEN ARGUING FOR THE FRENCH PLANE ON THE GROUNDS THAT THIS WILL FACILITATE THE CREATION OF AN EUROPEAN AIRCRAFT INDUSTRY, IN WHICH BELGIAN PRODUCERS WILL PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART. DE CLERQ IS UNLIKELY TO BE COME ACTIVELY INVOLVED UNLESS THERE IS A SPLIT AMONG HIS COLLEAGUES.

4. VAN ELSLANDE MAY BE THE KEY TO A DECISION FAVORABLE TO THE US. HE HAS ALREADY INVOLDED HIMSELF ACTIVELY. HE WENT TO THE HAGUE WITH VANDEN BOEYNANTS TO COORDINATE POSITIONS WITH THEIR DUTCH COUNTERPARTS BEFORE THE FOUR DEFENSE MINISTERS WENT TO FRANCE AND THE US. HE IS AWARE OF THE CRITICAL POLITICAL AND MILITARY IMPORTATANCE OF THE DECISION BEFORE THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT.

5. VAN ELSLANDE WOULD WEIGH CAREFULLY AND MIGHT BE INFLUENCED BY THE VIEWS OF THE SECRETARY. IF THE SECRETARY DECIDES TO SEE VAN ELSLANDE, I RECOMMEND THAT HE CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING ARGUMENTS:.

A. THE PRIMARY BASIS FOR THE DECISION ON WHICH AIR COMBAT FIGHTER TO ACQUIRE SHOULD BE THE CAPABILITY OF THE VARIOUS CONTENDING ARICRAFT SUCCESSFULLY TO ENGAGE POTENTIALLY HOSTILE AIRCRAFT IN COMBAT. I HAVE BEEN TROUBLED BY THE LACK OF DEBATE IN BELGIUM ON THIS
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CRUCIAL FACTOR. FEW BELGIANS IN OR OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT HAVE EVEN MENTIONED THIS CONSIDERATION, LET ALONE ANALYZED IT. IN MY OPINION, THE U.S. NEEDS TO MAKE A GREATER EFFORT TO PERSUADE BELGIANS THAT THE ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY INCORPORATED IN YF-16 AND YF-17 MAKE THEM CAPABLE OF DEFEATING ANY FOREIGN AIRCRAFT IN THE WORLD.

B. DEFENSE OF THE NATO COUNTRIES WOULD BE ENHANCED BY STANDARDIZATION OF FIGHTER AIRCRAFT. IN TIME OF WARFARE, THE FLEXIBILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ALLIED AIR FORCES WOULD BE AUGMENTED MARKEDLY IF ALL COUNTRIES HAD THE SAME AIRCRAFT.

C. I WOULD ALSO FAVOR GETTING ACROSS INDIRECTLY TO VAN ELSLANDE THE SECRETARY'S APPRECIATION OF THE CONSEQUENCES FOR NATO AND OF U.S.-BELGIAN RELATIONS OF A DECISION TO BUY A COMBAT AIRCRAFT FROM FRANCE OR SWEDEN. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT, GIVEN THE MILITARY SUPERIORITY, THE LOW COST, THE ATTRACTIVE CO-PRODUCTION OPPORTUNITY, AND THE CONTRIBUTION TO THE HIGH TECHNOLOGY CAPABILITY OF THE BELGIAN AIRCRAFT INDUSTRY OF EITHER AMERICAN AIRCRAFT, KEY AMERICANS WOULD REGARD A BELGIAN CHOICE OF A NON-AMERICAN PLANE AS HAVING BEEN MADE SOLELY ON POLITICAL GROUNDS. I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THIS APPROACH COULD BACKFIRE. SOME BELGIANS MIGHT TURN IT ON US BY SAYING THAT THE CHOICE OF THE MIRAGE COULD BE USED AS LEVERAGE TO BRING FRANCE INTO CLOSE COOPERATION WITH NATO. OTHER BELGIANS COULD SAY THAT THIS AMERICAN ARGUMENT DEMONSTRATES THE NEED FOR EUROPEANS TO FREE THEMSELVES FROM AMERICAN COERCION.. NONETHELESS, I THINK THAT KEY AMERICANS WILL REACT ADVERSELY TO A BELGIAN PURCHASE OF A NON-AMERICAN PLANE AND THAT THE BELGIANS SHOULD BE AWARE OF IT IN ADVANCE.

6. VAN ELSLANDE IS SCHEDULED TO LEAVE FOR NEW YORK THIS WEEKEND. FIRESTONE

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